



Working with communities,
lean thinking and an intelligent use
of technology are at the centre of
the local authority's cultural change.

Where lean thinking meets flexible working

How Wiltshire is taking a
different approach to cuts

Wiltshire Council is under the same pressure as local authorities throughout the country: to meet the expectations of its public while dealing with the national squeeze on public spending. It is also dealing with its own cultural change, having been in existence as a unitary for just three years since the merger of the county council with four district councils.

Given the challenges faced by local authorities today, Dr Carlton Brand believes that incremental change is not enough. His experience as corporate director of Wiltshire Council has led him to conclude that widespread change is needed, in which innovation is the watchword and technology a big enabler.

Changing how we think about change

"Think big, think bold," he says. "I see a lot of incrementalism around the public sector, doing the wrong things or looking for minor improvements, but it's not transformational enough. We need world-class political and managerial leadership for the sort of change needed. We're fortunate to have it in Wiltshire."

The prime challenge facing the leadership is to create a working culture that responds to the financial squeeze on local government. Wiltshire has set out to achieve savings of £36.2m in this financial year and, being responsible for all Council's corporate operations, Brand is at the centre of the effort to cope with these pressures.

Wiltshire has had to impose a freeze on salaries and a block on almost all recruitment and Brand acknowledges that its 5,000 employees now have to work longer and harder. This makes it a challenge to maintain their commitment, but he says that this has been achieved by creating a more flexible approach to work, and that technology has made an important contribution.

Freeing people to work how they work best

The council has a programme to provide about 2,000 of its staff with home working solutions, issuing many with laptops, and is now working with video technology to enable more home working. As a result, many employees now have more freedom in how they work and spend less time travelling to offices.



“We’re putting together packages for flexible working, have new offices that provide a great environment to work in, and have put a lot of investment into IT over the past two or three years, which is encouraging staff to stay with us,” Brand says.

“We have also enabled hot-desking in all of our libraries and some of our community facilities, so staff and customers touch down, can lock into the IT and work from there if it’s more convenient.”

Fewer offices, better equipped

Related to this is the council’s campaign to make savings by reducing its office space. In 2009, when the county council was merged with the local district councils as a unitary authority, they had 95 offices between them. Many of these have now been closed, and all employees are now based at one of its three hubs in Chippenham, Salisbury and Trowbridge.

About 1,200 people work from the old county hall in Trowbridge, but they share just 600 desks, providing

a significant reduction in running costs with a 2:1 desk ratio.

“The size of the property is much smaller, but everyone has got laptops or mobile devices and is working from home, from libraries, from wherever the customer is, rather than occupying expensive real estate,” Brand says.

New partnerships, new opportunities

Another core element of the transformation is how the authority is working more closely with communities, with the library service providing a prime example. Volunteers have taken over from staff in many buildings, under the management of senior librarians who divide their time between several libraries. Brand says that, although this has challenged the thinking of some local government officers, it works surprisingly well and is now being replicated for other services.

“We’re also doing more in community working and youth work – anything out there that’s

about delivering services with other people – and we’re fortunate that in Wiltshire there’s quite a lot of people ready to volunteer for that sort of work,” he says.

Waging war on waste

Equally important has been the application of lean methodology to council processes, focusing on the reduction of waste and duplication. Most of Wiltshire’s major services have now been redesigned with an emphasis on the customer’s perspective and taking out unnecessary costs.

“The challenge is that our budgets are being reduced but we can’t reduce the performance of services, we have to improve them,” he says. “So we need to strip out waste, duplication and non-value added work, and speed things up for the customer.”

Brand cites the example of highways management, notably the repair of potholes and other defects in the roads for which the council is responsible. It used to take about 60 days from the time a customer reported a pothole to it being filled in.



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The council examined the processes and made changes in its reporting mechanisms, how information was passed through the system, what stages could be cut out and how it could use technology to speed things up. Now filling holes in the road takes less than a week.

Improvements on such a scale are possible in most areas, and Wiltshire has been applying lean thinking to routine operations such as payments processing and more sensitive services such as children's safeguarding.

There are also savings in increasing the use of online services. In some cases, such as planning consultations, most of the activity now takes place online, making it easier for the public and reducing the costs for the council.

Greater savings on costs, fewer compromises on services

The result of all this has been to produce heavy savings that will enable the council to cope with the

spending cuts while continuing to provide essential services.

“In 2007 our support service costs were 19% of our net budget, but they are now just 9%, and that has been achieved through lean thinking, better processes and application of the right technology across our support services,” Brand says. “That has freed up a lot of money for investment in areas such as adult social services and children's care, where demand is increasing year on year.”

While he champions the use of new technology, he introduces a word of caution: it plays a key role in the transformation, but should be seen as an enabler and not the driver of change. Wiltshire is careful not to snap up new technology for its own sake, but to talk with suppliers about what it needs to do and how they can help it work faster and cheaper while preserving the quality of services. This approach ensures that it remains focused on the savings and service delivery and avoids making the wrong choices.

The transformation journey

The transformation is by no means complete. When Brand looks forward five years, he sees the council, and the broader public sector, with fewer staff and fewer buildings, but working more closely with the community and partner organisations.

“It will be an extension of where we are going at the moment,” he says. “The organisation will be smaller, more efficient, more closely aligned and working with people and communities rather than doing things to them. There will be a greater use of technology, modern buildings and working practices. It will be much more a public sector for the 21st century.”

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About Dr Carlton Brand

Carlton has worked in local government for eight years and is Corporate Director at Wiltshire Council. This role contains the responsibilities usually held by a Chief Executive, including Head of Paid Service and Returning Officer. Other responsibilities include business transformation, economic development, environment, planning, waste, highways, passenger transport, HR/OD, ICT, Property, and Business Services.

He has led on the transition to the new unitary council (Local Government Reorganisation – the merger of five councils into a single organisation); implementation of an ambitious new Business Management Programme (on the SAP ERP platform) to underpin the new organisation; the introduction of Systems Thinking (Lean) from manufacturing to transform service performance for customers & reduce cost; procurement reform; and a number of other efficiency and cost reduction programmes, amongst many other corporate responsibilities.

Prior to joining Wiltshire he was Corporate Director for Resources at St Edmundsbury Borough Council in Suffolk where he led on performance improvement through systems thinking and the efficiency/cost reduction agenda in response to the Gershon review as well as designing and implementing a new corporate procurement function.

For the first twenty years of his career, Carlton worked for Ford Motor Company; first as a design engineer in Product Development and latterly as a senior manager leading large teams of engineers on the concept, design, development and launch into manufacturing of major new model programmes such as the Focus and Fiesta. He has worked widely across Europe, the USA and Japan in many Ford and supplier engineering and manufacturing facilities in Programme & Project Management (PPM) roles.

Carlton acts as a coach to several external clients and a coach-mentor to a number of internal managers and staff. He was awarded his Advanced Certificate in Executive Coaching from Bristol Business School, and his Level 7 Certificate in Executive Coaching & Leadership Mentoring from the Institute of Leadership & Management. In line with best-practice, he works with a coaching supervisor.

Carlton holds Doctoral and Masters' degrees from the University of Hertfordshire (automotive engineering & management), and a bachelors' degree in Business Studies from the University of East London. He studied at Henley Management College on the Ford Fast Track Management Programme and at Duke University, North Carolina, USA on their Strategic Marketing Programme.

He was invited to submit a biography to Who's Who for the 2011 edition.

Married with two young sons he enjoys cricket, motor sport, fishing & astronomy.